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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000585

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: BURJANADZE SUPPORTERS ARRESTED - UPDATE

REF: A. TBILISI 559  
[1](#)B. TBILISI 502  
[1](#)C. TBILISI 378  
[1](#)D. TBILISI 089

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: National Security Secretary Eka Tkeshelashvili called in the Ambassador to further elaborate the government's position on the arrests of Former Speaker Burjanadze's supporters. At the same time, the Ministry of Internal Affairs released a portion of the video evidence they claim implicates members of Burjanadze's party purchasing illegal weapons. Burjanadze dismissed the evidence as "concocted" but said she would cooperate with the investigation. She called the arrests the beginning of "open terror" against her party and the larger opposition. The MOIA statement claimed that it was not planning to make any comment until the end of the investigation but needed to respond when "certain voices" called the arrests political repression. Additionally, MOIA spokesman Shota Utiashvili expressly denied that the MOIA thinks the weapons purchase was a part of a larger political conspiracy. The MOIA plans on releasing more evidence in the coming days. End Summary.

The Government's Case -- Arrests Stemmed from Arms Investigation, Not Party Politics

[1](#)2. (C) National Security Secretary Eka Tkeshelashvili told the Ambassador on March 23 that the MOIA had no plans to link the arrested individuals to Burjanadze or her party and that it was Burjanadze with her early public statements who connected herself to those who had been arrested. She believed Burjanadze had jumped to conclusions that the arrests were politically motivated without considering the evidence. Tkeshelashvili said that an ongoing operation by the MOIA into illegal arms sales led the MOIA to the individuals and she described the undercover videos as incontrovertible evidence. The National Security Secretary told the Ambassador that those who had been arrested explicitly stated in the videos they wanted smaller, more concealable weapons and that they intended to engage in a small shoot out. Tkeshelashvili said that the government wanted to guarantee safety for all those who wanted to exercise their right to express their views on April 9, and she hoped the international community would urge opposition leaders to avoid provocations. She said that the government had an extreme focus on public safety and predicted that there would not be further arrests.

MOIA Press Conference

[1](#)3. (C) On the evening of March 23 the MOIA presented evidence which purports to involve six separate episodes of covertly recorded footage of a sting operation with undercover agents acting as arms dealers. In the released footage a number of Burjanadze activists are seen attempting to buy CZ-75 semi-automatic pistols and expressing interest in purchasing AKS-U submachine guns - a shortened version of the Kalashnikov assault rifle. In another scene, Mamuka Shengelia, driver for Badri Bitsadze, husband of Nino

Burjanadze and former Chief of the Border Guards, was seen discussing specification for various types of firearms with an undercover agent. Another scene showed a man identified as Giorgi Tsertsvadze checking various types of firearms massed in a corner of what appeared to be an apartment room. According to the MOIA, Tsertsvadze was acting under orders from Shengelia to amass automatic weapons. Utiashvili explained that the arrests came in the course of monitoring the illegal arms trade, and he disavowed any greater political significance. Utiashvili further stated that "(t)he Interior Ministry was not planning to make any Q"(t)he Interior Ministry was not planning to make any statement until the end of the investigation, but some political and public organizations have responded to the incident and the issue was seriously politicized." Utiashvili confirmed that further evidence would be forthcoming.

#### Burjanadze and Other Opposition Reacts

14. (C) Burjanadze angrily dismissed the videos saying that "(n)ot a single normal court will consider the evidence shown on TV as enough evidence to prove the charges that have been made." Nevertheless, Burjanadze said that she was ready to cooperate with the investigation. A group of opposition parties gathered at the Public Defender's Office and signed a brief statement condemning the arrests (Embassy Note: The notable opposition who gathered to support Burjanadze were Alliance for Georgia (Alasania), United Georgia (Eka Beselia - Irakli Okruashvili), Conservative Party (Kakha Kukava), Industrialists (Zurab Tkemeladze), Georgia's Way (Salome Zourabichvili), People's Party (Koba Davitashvili), and Levan Gachicheladze. End Note.) The statement read in part that

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"(t)his action by the authorities is a clear provocation; an attempt to terrorize the society and an attempt to seed suspicion about the legality of the planned April 9 protest rally. We warn the authorities to stop provocative actions and to immediately release young people and all the political prisoners." Burjanadze read the statement aloud. Irakli Alasania (Alliance for Georgia) called the situation alarming and that "(o)f course it (the arrests) looks like that machinery of political repression has already been put into operation." Zviad Dzidziguri (Conservatives) called the arrests "a political stage show in which some foolish persons are taking part." The show of support occurred prior to the 8 pm initial release of video evidence which shows Burjanadze supporters having purchased and attempting to purchase illegal arms.

TEFFT